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BY

• JOSEPH W. POWER III
LIEUTENANT COLONEL, TRANSPORTATION CORPS

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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM

JOMINI: IS HE STILL APPLICABLE?

INDIVIDUAL ESSAY

by

Lieutenant Colonel Joseph W. Power III
Transportation Corps

US Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013
16 May 1983

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ABSTRACT

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Baron Antoine Henri Jomini is generally recognized as the dominant military strategist during much of the nineteenth century. However, technological advances at mid-century lead to extremely high casualties when tactics were not materially changed from those used during the Napoleonic Wars. The apparent failure of Jominian thought in the mid-nineteenth century has caused some to believe that he has little to offer in the modern context. On the strategic and policy level, this is not the case and his thoughts do provide some insight into the modern world.



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JOMINI: IS HE STILL APPLICABLE?

The Baron Antoine Henri Jomini (1779-1869) and Carl Von Clausewitz (1780-1831) are the two classical strategists who have dominated military thought since the early 1800s. Unlike Jomini, the early death of Clausewitz did not allow him to complete his works and they were in fact published after his death. Outside of Germany, Clausewitz's value as a strategist gained little attention. It has only been in the last few years that authoritative English translations have become available and he has gained popular notoriety and recognition as the "father" of modern strategic thought. However, in modern times Jomini's primary works have received considerable criticism because of his perceived influence on Civil War tactics and strategy, particularly that of the South, and the inevitable comparison with Clausewitz.

The comparison of Jomini and Clausewitz has been useful to the understanding of both theorists, but all too often the comparisons take on a tone of superior and inferior positions. This emphasis on the negative aspects or the apparent contradictions between the two can, and often have, lead to the superficial conclusion that Jomini is an interesting historical novelty, while true strategic insight was to be found in Clausewitz. Although most modern writers would quickly disclaim any attempt to give Jomini less than his due, there is little doubt that Clausewitz is sanctified as the high priest. The impact of this relative positioning has been a diminution of the positive aspects of Jominian thought and lack of possible applications to modern situations.

Despite the popular vision of Civil War generals riding into battle with a sword in one hand and a copy of Jomini's The Art of War in the other, there are arguments which support the thesis that Jomini was misinterpreted by his imitators or perhaps had little if any influence on Civil War strategy. Since the more notable field commanders for both North and South were predominantly West Point graduates, a brief summary of James L. Morrison's research into the education of Civil War generals provides interesting insight as to the possible practical influence of Jominian thought.

In the period 1833-1861, West Point graduated 997 officers (359 confederate and 638 union) who ultimately fought in the Civil War.¹ Although that number is impressive, it should be remembered that the academy's primary purpose was the education of engineers, and as Morrison notes: ". . . the academy was the child of the Corps of Engineers; invariably, the superintendent was an officer of that branch, and the Chief of Engineers in Washington exercised staff supervision over the institution."² The heavy emphasis on engineering was reflected in both the curriculum and subsequent assignments following graduation. During four years at West Point, 71 percent of classroom time was devoted to engineering subjects with the remaining 29 percent devoted to all other subjects including tactics. The engineering subjects also had a considerable influence on class standing which largely determined branch assignments following graduation. Therefore, among graduating officers, those in the top of the class were assigned to the Corps of Engineers, next in preference went to the Topographical Engineers or Ordnance, and the remainder to the combat arms.³ Of the 26.2 percent of cadets that failed during this period, the vast majority did so in either, mathematics, science or engineering; of 2,609 cadets admitted, only two failed tactics.⁴ It is very apparent from

these figures that success at West Point had very little to do with the mastery of military subjects. Additionally, there was no formal classroom instruction in tactics until the senior year.⁵ A cadet's exposure resulted mainly from practical exercises in drill and living in a military environment.⁶

During his four years at West Point, a cadet was subjected to a regimented environment with instruction taking a rote, prescriptive form. According to Morrison, there did not seem to be any encouragement of original or innovative thought. The cadets were pushed towards mechanical approaches to problem solving; an approach which did in fact produce splendid engineers, but not necessarily competent commanders.⁷ As the record showed, academic standing at West Point had little to do with future success on the Civil War battlefields. But even in modern times, the same condition exists with Patton being one of the best examples.

If West Point did not adequately prepare the future commanders for the Civil War, then what methods or role models were used? Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson have put forward a thesis that the Civil War commanders were heavily influenced by their experiences in the Mexican War and looked particularly to Winfield Scott and Zackary Taylor's campaigns and methods. For Grant this was certainly the case. As they point out:

Some lessons are difficult to unlearn, especially those taught to young people by respected instructors. Taylor and Scott were more than Grant's commander--they were his heroes.⁸

The lessons learned by Grant, Lee and others undoubtedly involved the virtues of the offensive when aggressively executed. They had seen how relatively small forces under Scott and Taylor had attacked larger Mexican forces and despite their inferior numbers had won. Out of that war, the then young officers brought to the Civil War battlefields a commitment to

assault tactics⁹ and a vision of success through aggressive, resolute action.¹⁰

Had the intervening years between the Mexican War and the Civil War exposed the Army to wars involving the use of massed forces, perhaps additional lessons could have been learned. But in the American tradition, the Army demobilized after the Mexican War and only experienced small unit operations in battles against the Indians. So when faced with massive force during the Civil War, it is reasonable to conclude that both Confederate and Union commanders must have been at least partially influenced by their most recent experiences in combat.

Although Scott and Taylor may have served as the role models for many senior commanders, the most influential American writer was probably Dennis Hart Mahan. An 1824 graduate of West Point, Mahan was brought back to the Military Academy by Thayer in 1832 and became the principal instructor for warfare and engineering.¹¹ Mahan was clearly Jominian in his approach to warfare and looked to Napoleon as the ultimate genius among the great captains. As Mahan said:

To him we owe those grand features of the art, by which an enemy is broken and utterly dispersed by one and the same blow. No futilities of preparation; no uncertain feeling about in search of the key-point; no hesitancy upon the decisive moment; the whole field of view taken in by one eagle glance; what could not be seen divined by an unerring military instinct; clouds of light troops thrown forward to bewilder his foe; a crushing fire of cannon in mass opened upon him; the rush of the impetuous column into the gap made by the artillery; the overwhelming charge of the resistless cuirassier; followed by the lancor and hussar to sweep up the broken dispersed bands; such were the tactical lessons practically taught in almost every great battle of this great military period.¹²

This romantic description of decisive engagements by Napoleon clearly shows Jomini as Mahan's interpreter of Napoleonic warfare. The emphasis on the offensive is equally clear and could only serve to reinforce the lessons of the Mexican War. Although Mahan was an engineer and contributed

most in the area of field fortifications, his "little" book (pocket size) could arguably replace Jomini's The Art of War in the other hand of the charging Civil War General. Mahan was well known to the senior officers from his almost thirty years at West Point and his works, as well as Halleck and others, were available as guides to further develop the commanders appreciation of war.

Mahan was first and foremost a teacher. His view encompassed the grand scale of strategy in the continental sense, but his forte was a system for winning the decisive battle. There is a question concerning his actual influence on the thinking of the Civil War commanders. But, there is no question that for many their first exposure to tactics and strategy was from Mahan.

As the title teacher implies, he structures and designs his work to answer the questions asked by the needs of his students in his and their chosen field of study. His efforts are directed at illuminating and clarifying the truths which have been derived and perhaps to form an intellectual thought process that ask additional questions and has the foundation to objectively develop answers that add to the body of thought; or alternatively, to equip the practitioner with the capability to analyze a new situation or problem and through the processes taught by the teacher arrive at a logical and successful solution.

Jomini was not a teacher in the usual sense of the word. He was not directing his thoughts towards the officer corps nor the governmental officials. His view had in most aspects had gone beyond the mundane duties and small details of junior officers and minor officials. Jomini saw his students as the senior staff officers and statesmen; but more specifically, he sought to instruct the commanders and general officers on the body of

principles he had derived from what he considered a detailed and thorough analysis of the campaigns of two of the greatest captains in the history of warfare--Napoleon and Frederick. It's not surprising that a man with an intellect capable of anticipating the strategy of Napoleon also felt equal to the task of instructing the princes and generals of his own time. Modern historian and strategists without exception seem to feel that he made a major contribution to the intellectual pursuit of military excellence in the nineteenth century, but the technological advance beginning just prior to the Civil War caused a rapid erosion of the validity of much of his written work.

Until just before the Civil War, the dominant infantry weapon was the musket with a range of just a few hundred yards and an accuracy that was questionable even in the hands of an expert. Because of the limitations of the weapons, forces closed within effective range before delivering a massed volley and relied on the bayonet to clear the field. The introduction of the oblong shape minie ball and acceptance of rifles over muskets as the standard infantry weapon allowed the range to be more than doubled and the accuracy to be greatly increased. These weapons for the most part continued to be muzzle loaders, but now multiple volleys could be delivered against opposing massed forces. Additionally, the traditional forward positioning of artillery in the offensive was no longer possible. Commanders were now faced with enormous casualties when using close order formations in attacks against fortified positions. In an effort to reduce losses, open formations were used, but the opposing forces rarely fought in terrain that allowed the commanders to effectively control the advancing formations. This dichotomy was not resolved during the course of the Civil War and resulted in loses that were not duplicated until World War I.

For the South, which adopted an offensive--defensive strategy, the losses proved decisive. In the early years of the war, Lee constantly sought to engage the Union Army in a decisive battle. He won brilliant victories, but was never able to neutralize the opposing force and thereby gain a negotiated peace.

Lee and other field commanders, such as Halleck and Beauregard, did study Jomini, and some writers have implied that the application of Jominian thought lead to the ultimate defeat of the South by Union generals who used their native intellect and resilience to defeat Confederate generals who relied on a bankrupt strategist. The foremost among these Union generals is of course Grant, who is depicted "as an officer who ranked low in his class at West Point and who claimed little knowledge of the literature of war...."¹³ The image which emerges is that of a man not afflicted with the vices of how war was fought in the early nineteenth century (unlike his confederate counterparts). He was able to intuitively grasp broad strategic concepts and possessed the determination necessary to carry them through. In fact, Grant is reported to have written:

... except for one instance, 'I . . . never looked at a copy of tactics from the time of my graduation.' That exception occurred when he received his first Civil War command. 'I got a copy of (Hardee's) tactics and studied one lesson. . . . I perceived at once, however, that Hardee's tactics--a mere translation from the French with Hardee's name attached--was nothing more than common sense. . . . I found no trouble in giving commands that would take my regiment where I wanted it to go. . . . I do not believe that the officers of the regiment ever discovered that I had never studied the tactics that I used.'¹⁴

As already noted, Grant is depicted as the decisive commander with a natural instinct for waging war. In his Vicksburg campaign, he severed his lines of communication with his base of operations¹⁵ and did not allow himself to be deterred from ". . . a well-defined strategic goal, the

opening of the Mississippi; and view battles as means rather than as end, he refused to be diverted from his goal by the temporary fortunes of any given battle.¹⁶ In Grants view: "The art of war is simple enough. . . . Find out where your enemy is. Get at him as soon as you can, and keep moving on."¹⁷ Grant was clearly a general imbued with the offensive spirit and an appreciation for retaining the initiative while focusing on the ultimate objective.

Does it follow, however, that the lack of study by Grant allowed him to adopt "unconventional" methods and out-general his opponents, or could Grant's campaigns also be supportive and expressed in Jominian terms? The latter would seem to hold some promise. At the time Grant assumed command of the Union Army, why is it not reasonable to view the Confederacy east of the Mississippi as a theater of operation and the Army of Northern Virginia around Richmond as the decisive point supported by a base of operations to the West and South. With the Confederacy defined in these terms, Jominian strategy would suggest that the Army of Northern Virginia should be fixed by a superior force, thus denying that force the opportunity to maneuver and engage the Union forces in detail. While the Army of Northern Virginia is placed on both the strategic and tactical defense, other Union armies should attack the Confederate base of operations to the East and South. These two areas in their turn would also become theaters of operation with their own decisive points which would involve both territorial gain and the opposing force. The Jominian prescription:

Armies may act in concert or separately: in the first case the whole theater of operations may be considered as a single field upon which strategy directs the armies for the attainment of a definite end. In the second case each army will have its own independent theater of operations. The theater of operations of an army embraces all the territory it may desire to invade. . . .¹⁸

Grant saw the two armies under Lee and Johnston as the two decisive forces to be defeated, but he also recognized the logistical value of the deep South and the Shenandoah Valley. Weigly quotes Grant's orders to his subordinates as follows:

o To Meade in Northern Virginia: "Lee's army will be your objective point. Wherever Lee goes, there you will go also."¹⁹

o To Sherman in Tennessee:

You I propose to move against Johnston's army, to break it up and to get into the interior of the enemy's country as far as you can, inflicting all the damage you can upon their warresources.²⁰

o To Sheridan in the Shenandoah Valley:

... I want Sheridan put in command of all the troops in the field, with instructions to put himself south of the enemy and follow him to death, wherever the enemy goes let our troops go also.²¹

The grand tactic adopted by Grant was one of annihilation which took into account the North's superior resources in men and material. Jomini would have undoubtedly have shrunk from this direct approach, and more likely have favored the finesse of the indirect approach. But, by the time Grant took command of the Union armies, it had become evident that a single decisive battle was not feasible and that a favorable outcome could only result from a series of battles which would consume the South's limited resources. This approach also had the advantage of sapping the morale of the Confederacy, since "... it is the morale of armies, as well as of nations, more than anything else, which makes victories and their results decisive."²²

The new weapons favored defense, but only offensive action could resolve the conflict on terms politically favorable to the Union--in tactics, Jomini's "truths" had been unable to withstand technological

advancement; however, on the strategic level this would not appear to be the case. As Jomini said:

Strategy is the art of making war upon the map, and comprehends the whole theater of operations. . . . Strategy decides where to act; logistics brings the troops to this point; grand tactics decides the manner of execution and the employment of the troops. . . .²³ In a moral and political view, the offensive is nearly always advantageous: it carries the war upon foreign soil, saves the assailant's country from devastation, increases his resources and diminishes those of his enemy, elevates the morale of his army, and generally depresses the adversary. . . . Indeed, if the art of war consists in throwing the masses upon the decisive points, to do this it will be necessary to take the initiative. The attacking party knows what he is doing and what he desires to do; he leads his masses to the point where he desires to strike. He who awaits the attack is everywhere anticipated. . . .²⁴

So, with a redefinition of the theaters of operation, an examination of Grant's overall concept and an assessment of actual outcomes, a reasonable argument can be made for describing the events in Jominian terms. Although this treatment is necessarily superficial, there are also other conclusions which can be drawn. Jomini certainly had some influence on some Civil War commanders, but the depth and degree are uncertain. Likewise, those exposed to Scott and Taylor during the Mexican War learned some lessons which they inevitably carried into the Civil War. And finally, educational preparation for war at West Point had little impact or sense of appreciation on graduating cadets. The point is, that attempting to fine-tune the causes, effects, and influence of Jomini, Mahan, Scott, Taylor or any other individual or events during the Civil War or any other war are historically interesting, but do not capture the complete thought process nor all the contributing factors in arriving at great decisions. In the world of "what ifs"--what if Grant had been thoroughly familiar with the classical strategist? Would he have been even greater than he was?

Efforts in defining the elements which allowed a commander to be considered "great" can provide some insight. Surely that individual not only possessed a keen intellect, but was the product of his cumulative experience, development and conditioning. The question is not whether Clausewitz is superior to Jomini; more appropriately, it is whether the study of both will result in a better overall understanding of war. As Michael Howard observed, Jomini focused on

. . . precise operational analysis, based on logistical needs and topographical limitations, . . . while the emphasis on war as the realm of the uncertain and unpredictable, a matching not so much of intelligence as of will, personality, and moral fibre, was to inspire the work of . . . Clausewitz. . . .²⁵

For Jomini, war had a small number of probabilities and for Clausewitz it had large numbers of possibilities.

Jomini seeks to explain, Clausewitz to explore . . .
Jomini is . . . well-organized, practical . . .
Clausewitz . . . is ivory-towered. . . . You can
feel comfortable with Jomini; Clausewitz will remind
you of your inadequacies.²⁶

It would appear that these are opposing views of the same phenomenon, but the difference is more in the approach to describing war. In the modern lexicon, Jomini wrote what could be called a "How to Fight" manual structured in a prescriptive style. Conversely, Clausewitz relied on the philosophical and metaphysical which emphasized the uncertainties and will of the opposing factions. The approach is different, but not necessarily contradictory.

Within the doctrinal developments of the US Army, Clausewitz's writings are receiving much attention, particularly in institutions such as the US Army War College, but in the published doctrine there remains the character of Jominian thought. For example the AirLand Battle 2000 concept with its emphasis on offense and maneuver is based on five essential principles:

- Agility: Being able to act faster than your opponent.

- Initiative: To quickly gain and maintain the offensive.
- Depth: Recognize the operational area has depth and impacts on time--distance and resources.
- Time: Must be minimized to allow maneuver against the decisive point at the most appropriate time.
- Synchronization: All activities directed at the decisive events--more than coordination.

The five essential principles have many similarities to Jomini's four maxims concerning the fundamental principles of war, and these maxims also contain the same emphasis on offense and maneuver, Jomini said:

1. To throw by strategic movements the mass of an army, successively, upon the decisive points of a theater of war, and also upon the communications of the enemy as much as possible without compromising one's own.
2. To maneuver to engage fractions of the hostile army with the bulk of one's forces.
3. On the battlefield, to throw the mass of the forces upon the decisive point, or upon that portion of the hostile line which it is of the first importance to overthrow.
4. To so arrange that the masses shall not only be thrown upon the decisive point, but that they shall engage at the proper times and with the energy.²⁷

Although the US Army's original principles of war were largely developed from the works of British Major General J. F. C. Fuller,²⁸ they also can be seen to contain many of the same elements as Jomini's four maxims. The nine principles are as follows:

1. Objective. Every military operation should be directed towards a clearly defined, decisive, and attainable objective. . . .
2. Offensive. Seize, retain, and exploit the initiative. . . .
3. Mass. Concentrate combat power at the decisive place and time. . . .
4. Economy of Force. Allocate minimum essential combat power to secondary efforts. . . .
5. Maneuver. Place the enemy in a position of disadvantage through the flexible application of combat power. . . .

6. Unity of Command. For every objective, there should be unity of effort under one responsible commander. . . .
7. Security. Never permit the enemy to acquire an unexpected advantage. . . .
8. Surprise. Strike the enemy at a time and/or place and in a manner for which he is unprepared. . . .
9. Simplicity. Prepare clear, uncomplicated plans and clear, concise orders to insure thorough understanding. . . .²⁹

Jomini's four maxims do not directly address all of the Army's current principles, such as Unity of Command; but, it should not be inferred that he considered such fundamental concepts as unimportant. In fact, in the case of the unity of command principle, he goes to great length describing those qualities, capabilities and skills necessary in a successful commander, and the need to place such a man at the head of the Army.³⁰ Similarly, the principle of simplicity was held by Jomini as one of the more important attributes in selecting a general. He said, a general's "...most important qualification... after that of knowing how to form good plans, is, unquestionably, that of facilitating the execution of his orders by their clearness of style."³¹

However, the US Army's principles of war also do not portray all of the concepts which are basic to the art of soldiering. As every commander and leader knows, the morale of a force is of the utmost importance and is included in the principles of other armies such as the British and the Soviets. From the time a young officer enters the Army, next to mission, the morale of his troops is of paramount concern, and will inflict severe peril if disregarded. Nor does Jomini include morale as an aspect of his four maxims; but like the US Army, in other places he makes it quite clear that it is a condition of immense importance to the commander. In his 1816, "General Principles Upon Which the Art of War Rests," he said:

To render the superior shock of a mass decisive, it is equally necessary for a general to bestow the same care upon the morale

of his army. Of what use is it to bring into action fifty thousand men against twenty thousand, if they lack the impulsion necessary to rush upon and overthrow the enemy?³²

Even the Jominian analysis which relied on precise definition and reducing operations to geometric combinations of zones, lines and points can be seen in modern computer assisted war gaming. He approached a theater of operations as a flat surface upon which the commander must determine his zone of operations from a secure base, select the appropriate line of operation (simple, double, interior, exterior, etc.²⁸), and commit the mass of forces at the decisive point and time. The secret for the successful commander was in selecting the right combinations and having the intellect which could correctly identify the decisive point and time. The modern commander in fighting the AirLand Battle is faced with a similar dilemma--at what point in time does he commit his reserve to achieve decisive results.

The geometric symmetry Jomini applied to his analysis of battles and campaigns has been criticized because it ". . . led him farther into the field of abstract reasoning than his practical experience of war should have permitted him to venture." Howard goes on to say: "It may be legitimate, but it is also dangerous, for a theorists to think of a theatre of war in terms of a 'chessboard'.³³ Howard's caution is appropriate for the reader who only sees war as a two dimensional endeavor where two opposing forces collide and the outcome is determined by the commander who has selected the correct lines, decisive point and time. Howard does credit Jomini with the additional dimension of how a battle is fought is as important as where it is fought,³⁴ and it is in this context that Jominian analysis and computer assisted war-gaming should be viewed. How the battle is fought will be determined in large measure by the will and resolve of a nation, the commander and the soldiers. These are abstractions which defy

objective calculation, but carry equal force in determining the outcome of a war. It is here that the Clausewitzian emphasis is greater than that of Jomini, but the difference in emphasis should not distract from the positive contribution of either.

History has shown, even to the modern day, that at different times and in different places, each successful strategist has dominated the military thought of his proponents. Their favorite offers the secret to success in battle and cannot be disregarded by the successful commander. The first imperative is that their strategist's particular view is akin to the Ten Commandments—if violated the commander invites destruction. "The truths are self-evident and clearly reinforced by an analytical examination of historical examples of campaigns and battles." Jomini, like Clausewitz, took no credit for originality; the "truths" of his view of war had already been demonstrated by the great captains. He was "merely" the "first" to organize and codify what they had done. The principles which guided Napoleon and the other great captains were universal and pervasive. Success by the advocates reinforced the validity of the theory. Alternately, failure by the advocates discredited the theory.

As has been shown, this narrow perspective clouds alternative views and often creates a bias which obscures the positive contributions. Much of what Jomini wrote has been dated by technological advances, but his analytical methodology and his thoughts on the strategic and policy level still have currency. That is not to imply that his concern with the activity and mechanism of war, rather than the nature of war, is more relevant than other strategists. On the contrary, it is intended to reinforce the position that there is no such thing as the single greatest strategist—each has made his own contribution to the total body of

strategic thought. Hopefully, students of war will draw from each and form their own body of knowledge not based on superiority or inferiority, but a synthesis of greater value than the sum of its parts. In that context, Jomini will indeed be an important contributor.

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